

New Fiction in Varied Forms

MERTON OF THE MOVIES. By Harry Leon Wilson. Doubleday, Page & Co.

HERE is our always good and greatly entertaining old friend, Harry Leon Wilson, quite returned to normalcy. The book preceding this was a slight wandering "off his beat"—not that "The Wrong Twin" wasn't a good story, for it was, but it might possibly have been written by some one else. This one could not have come from any other hand. It is one of the penalties of having created a "Ruggles" and a "Bunker Bean" that the public will not willingly let their maker do anything of lesser individuality. It is a severe demand, but in "Merton" Mr. Wilson fully lives up to it. Merton is worthy to be enshrined along with his two immortal predecessors. He is unique.

In conception Merton is a more subtly understood character than anything Mr. Wilson has as yet produced. If the texture of workmanship, the more or less mechanical side of expression is, sometimes, just a little careless, suggestive of haste, that is a small matter compared to the excellence of the whole. Not that it is really careless or in any way slipshod; merely that its surface does not always show the high polish of some of Mr. Wilson's other work. When that very slight flaw is noted, there is little left to say except in the line of joyous, exhilarated approval and enjoyment of the delectable entertainment and edification provided by the story.

The moving picture world is so patently exactly the field wherein one would expect Mr. Wilson's keen, mildly sardonic but fundamentally good natured humor to function that it is only remarkable that he has waited until now to "take it up in a serious way" and devote a whole book to it. But now he has made a very thorough job of it. His criticism is beautifully adapted to the end in view; he is not afraid, when necessary, to out-travesty the wildest burlesques, but for the most part it is a more delicately managed dissection, a turning on and off, as desired, of just the right exploratory lighting to guide the hand of the demonstrator. Its deftness and accuracy of touch are superb.

Mr. Wilson is a master of the very difficult art of the extravaganza. He knows just where to stop, just how to shift from the monumentally absurd at the precise instant when it threatens to become the impossible and thus spoil itself. He knows, too—and this is even a rarer gift—how to make his broadest human absurdities still always human and with a side to them that remains dignified, lovable, sometimes even tragic in its humanness. The Merton of this story is a truly heroic figure in spite of himself. He is the perfect "Nutmeg," but his very nuttiness is majestically human.

The story records the transformation of Merton Gill, hard worked clerk in the "general store" of Amos G. Gashwiler (an emporium—Everything for the Home. Our Prices Always Right) at Simsbury, Illinois, into the famous young screen hero Clifford Armytage of Hollywood. Merton is the living incarnation of him "nuttitude" if we may be allowed the phrase. He is passionately determined to become a screen hero himself, preferably in Western stuff, the "great outdoors where a man is a man," &c. He is immensely uplifted by the serious nobility of all. He has a soul above the comics, and he takes everything and everybody concerned in the business with the utmost seriousness. He has a vivid screen imagination, a real talent for the make-believe, a child-like ability to live himself into a part. And he has not a chemical trace of humor, in the popular sense of the word, in his make-up. As his discoverers sum it up at the moment when he has actually reached the threshold of fame:

"But, listen—does he know he's funny?"

"Not in a thousand years! He doesn't know anything's funny, near as I can make out."

Therein lies the astonishing tragedy-comedy of his whole career, which makes of him, in the end, the "tragic comedian" of the screen.

He has taken a correspondence course in motion picture acting, and



Harry Leon Wilson.

has had a number of "stills" made of himself in various costumes, and when he has saved what he thinks is enough money he boldly goes off to Hollywood to seek his fortune. After a long wait and much distressing adventure—the details of which should be left for the reader to enjoy at leisure—he gets a chance and "makes good," though not quite as he imagines. He is taken up by an intelligent director, who sees in him the perfect burlesque—perfect because of the unconsciousness of it—of a popular film idol. Merton works in all seriousness and never suspects any comic element in the thing until after the film is actually produced. Just how Mr. Wilson gets him around that hard corner should also be left to the reader's discovery—but it is admirably managed. It won't spoil it, however, to quote the climax of the solution. He has at last realized something of the burlesque of it—he and his bride (who is also his discoverer) are together:

"He shivered—or did he shudder?—and quickly reached to take her hand. It was a simple, direct gesture, yet somehow it richly had the quality of pleading. . . .

"Mother understands," she whispered. "Only remember you mustn't seem to think it's funny."

"I won't," he said again. But in his torn heart he stubbornly cried, "I don't! I don't!"

The long road to this climax is richly dotted with incident, of varying flavor, from the broadest farce to the most delicate and often pathetic shadings of humor. It has plenty of event, and the many people one meets on the way are all worth while. "Flips," the girl who finally rescues Merton from starvation and starts him on the road to success, is herself a most engaging young woman—good enough to "make" a book, even if there were little else in it. Naturally we meet a large company of film people, actors, directors, artisans and hangers-on—a finely diversified army. We go behind the scenes at many points and assist in shooting more than one great picture.

The process of Merton's disillusionment—or, rather, what would be entire disillusionment to any one less of a "nut"—is extensive and gives Mr. Wilson a chance to insert not a little caustically explanatory matter on the general theme. Merton learns that his first heroine, the lovely Beulah Baxter, is not quite all he had imagined her. She allows another to "double" for her for the most dangerous stunts of the great serial, "The Hazards of Hortense." When he asks if she is married he gets various replies, one to the effect that "she often is," and when he alters the query to "is she unmarried?" the answer is "twice." He also learns something of the way a scenario is built up from a starting point, but it makes small impression on Merton. It will delight the reader, however, in any of its several manifestations. One specimen tempts to quotation:

The director, Henshaw, and the "Governor" are discussing making a picture out of Robinson Crusoe. The Governor objects:

"But, say, look here, how about your love interest?"

"Henshaw waved this aside with his own cigarette. . . . 'Easy enough—Belmore can fix that up. . . . How about having Friday's sister brought over with him to the island? The cannibals are going to eat her, too. And Crusoe rescues the two. And when he cuts the girl's bonds he finds she can't be Friday's real sister, because she's white—see what I mean? Well, we work it out later that she's the daughter of an English Earl that was wrecked near the cannibal island and they rescued her and Friday's mother brought her up as her own child. She's saved the papers that came ashore, and she has the Earl's coat of arms tattooed on her shoulder blade, and finally after Crusoe has fallen in love with her and she's remembered a good deal of the past along comes the old Earl, her father, in a ship and rescues them all. How about that? Henshaw, brightly expectant, awaited the verdict of his chief."

"Well—I don't know." The other considered. "Where's your conflict, after the girl is rescued from the savages? And Crusoe in the book wears a long beard. How about that? He won't look like anything—sort of hairy, and that's all."

Henshaw then suggests that they "modernize" it—make it into a yacht with a rich young New Yorker as the modern Crusoe, equip him with a valet and other up to date accessories and so on. The theme crops up again, each time with some new frill and at last emerges as that great success—"Island Love"—love instead of "passion" because passion has been a little overplayed. One might suppose it nearly impossible to burlesque the existing screen versions of old stories, any more than it is advisable to try to gild the lily, but Mr. Wilson has managed to do it with entire success.

The book thus has a double value: as an illuminating but usually understandingly tolerant satire on the whole moving picture business, and also as a living delineation of a single human eccentricity who embodies in himself, raised to an art power, a not at all uncommon form of "possession" among the aspiring youth, both male and female, of today. Not merely the Simsburies and other way stations but also the sophisticated cities are full of girls and boys who feel the same thrill of aspiration that made a hero out of Merton. The book thus has the lasting quality of a valid satire upon a widespread tendency of the times. And, above all, it is hugely amusing from its opening, where Merton is juggling with the store dummies as he acts out a "scene" down to the final bit of perfectly imitated criticism from a motion picture magazine's interview with the successful hero.

HENRY WALKER.

THE VANISHING POINT. By Coningsby Dawson. Cosmopolitan Book Corporation.

MR. DAWSON has produced a book which Ouida at her finest might have been proud to claim. Here are beings of wealth and the deepest dye of wickedness, great lords with endless power, scheming against whole nations. Here are women, more beautiful than a dream, easily murdering man after man as they pass on through life; here is one lurid adventure after another. If you know what you want, and it is this sort of want, then you will get your money's worth in buying "The Vanishing Point." This point, it is explained, is the one in life that resembles the spot where, if you look up a railway track, the two rails appear to meet and disappear. Should a train get to that spot, it would, of course, be wrecked. Should a life reach the same point. . . . It may be claimed that in the first case the thing is an illusion, and perhaps it is because of this that Mr. Dawson's book is so unreal. It certainly dances at the vanishing point from beginning to end.

However, it has its thrills. From the moment when the American financier, Philip Hindwood, meets Prince Rogovich on board the liner events crowd one another on the pages. They crowd all the faster since Mr. Dawson scorns finding any explanations for many of them. Things happen, that's all; like it or leave it. Rescuers rescue when rescue is needed, and then disappear, taking their mystery with them. Those who are dead must occasionally be killed all over again, so little do they realize it, so persistently do they go on living. It reminds one of the difficulty the Bad Man had in the play of that name in keeping the villain properly dead. "How many times must I kill you?" inquires the Bad Man, peevishly, doing it again. So it is here.

The woman in the case is of mixed blood, drawing from Asia along with various other places. She has the faults of her inheritance, and the virtues that go with such. She is head of some sort of a band, not

Continued on Following Page.



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